

Behaviour Tips:

Managing Mouthy Dogs



What is “mouthing” behaviour?

Mouthing behaviour occurs when a dog places their mouth and teeth on a person's skin and applies pressure to the person's skin. Mouthing is a natural behaviour that can be completely normal when performed in context. In extreme forms, mouthiness can be a damaging or dangerous behaviour and is no longer a normal social signal. Puppies use their mouths to explore the world. When they begin to explore socializing with other dogs – grabbing and learning how to respond to responses to being grabbed is part of normal development. If they hurt another puppy or their mom, the response they receive is crying, growling, grabbing or being left alone so most pups learn to grab but not hold to the point of hurting. When this behaviour continues as dogs age, we can have a behaviour that is not normal and possibly injurious as they are holding for too long, too hard or whenever they want anything.



Why Do Dogs Become “Mouthy”?

There are many reasons why a dog may exhibit mouthing behaviour:

- Some dogs are mouthy because it is what we have asked the breed to do this – retrievers for example are often asked to grab and bring things back.
- Older dogs may mouth if they never learned to bite softly as a puppy (can occur in dogs raised without other dogs).
- It is a natural way that dogs greet each other and people using tactile behaviour.
- The dog is excited and wants to engage in play.
- Mouthing is performed as a means of communicating and seeking attention or if a desired need requires attention (e.g. asking for dinner, wanting to go outside, etc.).
- Aggression or fear to stop some behaviour they find scary or threatening.

It is important to teach your dog to curb their mouthing behaviour by teaching them to inhibit their grabbing and biting.

Can we inhibit what starts as a neutral, normal behaviour?

Yes. Puppies learn not to bite their siblings too hard and not to bite their mom for everything. Dogs can learn to control the force of their bite or choose not to bite. One of the reasons pups usually learn this quickly is when one dog bites another, the second dog will yelp and the playing will stop. Eventually this will teach them that in order for the play to continue they must control how hard they bite.

Owners can also teach their dog that grabbing and biting are undesirable behaviours. Start by playing with your dog with a larger toy. Mouthy dogs tend to grab the hand holding the toy. As soon as they grab you, let your hand go limp and make a sound that can act as a marker for the behaviour (‘uh, uh’ or ‘eek!’). The limpness stops rewarding the play and the sound should startle and interrupt the behaviour. The dog *should* stop playing and if they do you should immediately reward this good behaviour. They should also be rewarded for grabbing the toy instead of your hand when re-engaging in play.

If noise and interruption does not work then stop playing and put your dog behind a gate or elsewhere for a true “time-out”. *As soon as they are calm* (0.5-3 minutes), you try to play again.

Recommendations

- To prevent the mouthing behaviours from developing further, all mouthing should be avoided by redirecting their attention with a toy and rewarding them for substituting the toy instead of your hands.
- If your dog is mouthing when being petted, you can attempt rewarding them with treats in your opposite hand while simultaneously petting them with your other hand. This can be used to teach fetch or tug-of-war as a way of encouraging non-contact playing.
- You can add requests like “sit”, “wait” and “leave-it”, and games involving targeting to teach your dogs that they do not have to use their mouth for everything.

Although these tips are helpful, if you do not see improvement, please discuss any behavioural concerns with your local veterinarian or seek specialist services (www.dacvb.org). At the Atlantic Veterinary College you can contact the AVC Behavioural Medicine Service (AVCBehaviouralMed@upei.ca)